

Brian Kroshus and daughters Megan (left) and Alyssa (right) prepare to leave Bismarck on opening weekend of deer season.



YOUNG HUNTERS

North Dakota Experiencing Positive Gains

By Craig Bihrlé

If you look past the smile of a young hunter posing with her first deer, or his first duck, you'll see a statistic that is getting a lot of attention of late.

Across the country, the number of first-time-hunter smiles is declining. It's not a fall-off-the-cliff decline, but rather a long-term trend that indicates fewer kids, and a lower percentage of kids, are taking up hunting.

This trend, if it is not reversed, has long-term implications for conservation funding,

conservation promotion, and perhaps the ability for state natural resource agencies to manage some wildlife populations.

At the moment, however, North Dakota is not following the national trend.

In an era when simply matching historical participation rates would be enviable, the number of North Dakota resident hunters has increased to its highest level – ever. The percentage of youngsters in the mix is higher than at any other time for which reliable statistics are available.

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And yet, North Dakota Game and Fish Department officials are just as concerned as their counterparts in other states. On the horizon is a significant population shift that will mean fewer kids available to start hunting, and more longtime hunters reaching the age when they start to scale back.

Recruitment and Retention

This whole issue is wrapped up in a broad term called “recruitment and retention,” or the process of introducing kids – or adults – to outdoor activities and holding their interest. It’s nothing new in North Dakota. The Game and Fish Department, governor,

legislature and wildlife groups across the state have long recognized the value of hunting – to individuals, and the state. A number of initiatives designed to reverse downward trends in license sales have their roots in the drought years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when resident hunting (and fishing) license sales and participation fell dramatically, both among kids and adults.

Among the efforts are the Pathways to Fishing and Hunting programs at the North Dakota State Fair, establishing the special youth deer season and opening some Canada goose closure areas to youth waterfowl hunters in 1994, special youth waterfowl weekends, Game and Fish YOUTH access program, youth pheasant season in 2005, and countless projects and mentored hunts by individuals and wildlife clubs to give kids opportunities to experience hunting.

Statistics indicate these efforts are paying off. The number of 14- and 15-year-olds who bought a deer license in 2005 was about 50 percent higher than it was in 1990. The number of 14- and 15-year-olds buying some type of hunting license is higher by percentage, and by pure numbers, than almost any other age group of North Dakota hunters.

Special opportunities, however, are not the only reason youth participation in North Dakota has increased. Since 1990, pheasant, deer and waterfowl hunting prospects have greatly improved. In recent years the Game and Fish Department has issued record numbers of deer licenses. The state is coming off a decade of some of the best duck and goose production in the last 75 years, and pheasant hunting, statewide, is pretty much the best anyone under the age of 50 has experienced in their lifetime.

Mostly likely because of this perceived greater expectation of success, the number of adults who buy some type of hunting license has also increased significantly. In 1990, the Game and Fish Department sold 86,797 general game licenses, required of everyone who hunts in North Dakota, except landowners hunting on their own land.

In 2005, that number was more than 107,000, a 23 percent increase. Since North

North Dakota General Game and Habitat License Sales

(This license is required of anyone who hunts in North Dakota, except landowners hunting on their own land, including gratis deer hunters.)

Year	# Sold	ND population
1967	78,120	
1970	82,107	618,000
1974	95,806	
1977	93,320	
1980	88,807	653,000
1985	89,751	
1990	81,637	638,000
2000	96,483	642,000
2005	107,791	637,000 (est)

In 2005, the number of general game licenses sold was the highest ever, or 16.9 percent of the entire state population. Excluding ages 9 and under and 65 and over, the percentage is 21.3. The percentage would be higher if there was a way to determine the number of landowners who hunt who don’t buy a license.

North Dakota Student Population Statistics

Total Enrollment Grades K-12 All Schools

Year	Enrollment
2005	105,381
2000	117,400
1995	128,178
1990	126,209
1985	128,621
1980	129,720
1975	146,636
1970	163,074

** The greatest total enrollment for a senior class in the last 45 years occurred in the 1969-70 school year, at 12,262, according to North Dakota Department of Public Instruction statistics. Second was 1976-77 at 12,215.*

** The smallest first grade class in the last 45 years occurred in 2005-06, at 7,644.*

** The smallest total enrollment occurred in 2005-06 at 105,381.*

Dakota's population did not increase at all during those 15 years, "We probably recruited a whole lot of people back into hunting," says Game and Fish Deputy Director Roger Rostvet.

People like Don Shuler, Lincoln, who hadn't hunted for many years prior to 2005 because he says it just became too difficult to find land on which to hunt. But then a new neighbor moved in, a neighbor who had access to some good pheasant hunting land and invited him along. The fun was back and Don's son, Brandon, 14, took the state's hunter education course so he could go along as well.

It's difficult to determine the degree to which each of these factors influenced what has taken place in North Dakota, but the

combination has worked. The primary challenge, according to Rostvet, is maintaining the state's wildlife resources.

In North Dakota, studies have documented that approximately 25 percent of people who hunt or fish in one year may not buy a license the next year. Put another way, the pool of people who at one time or another have hunted in North Dakota is considerably larger than the number who actually buy a license in any given year. For many, the likelihood of participation is based on potential for success. The trends are evident in license sales that are tracked through good times and bad. License sales go up when opportunities are good. License sales go down when opportunities are reduced.

Right now is a good time for hunting in North Dakota. Adult hunters are participating at a higher rate than in the past. So are kids. The concern, however, is numbers. North Dakota's largest age group is people in their 40s. That's also the age grouping in which hunting participation is highest. Close to 25 percent of all North Dakotans in their 40s had a deer license in 2005. That's about the same rate as for young hunters in the 14-17 age group.

The challenge, however, is that North Dakota has about 1,300 more 44-year-olds than 14-year-olds. The number of 8-year-olds, the kids who will reach deer hunting age just a few years from now, is about 900 less than the number of 14-year-olds. The trend is roughly the same in many other states where there are fewer kids coming up to replace the hunters in the middle age group who will be dropping out in the years to come.

Even if the rate of kids hunting in North Dakota remains the same at around 25 percent, the raw numbers will decline unless a greater percentage of the people who start hunting, stay with it, or the rate of annual turnover is reduced. The good news is, that's where there's the most potential for improvement.

In North Dakota, deer hunting participation falls off noticeably after young hunters reach age 18. Beyond that, the state has a significant number of young adults who got a start in hunting, but for whatever reason – school, work, new families, moved away from home area, etc. – just lost interest.

For example, if all ages from 14-54 participated at the same rate as just 14 and 15 year olds, North Dakota would have an additional 16,000 deer hunters each year.

That's the retention side, and it's as much of a challenge for the outdoors as it is for any other recreational activity. People, both kids and adults, explore many interests in their lives. Some they like. Others they don't. For the most part, getting people to try something is a lot easier than retaining a lifelong participant.

Hunting isn't for everybody. Not every *kind* of hunting is of interest to everyone who hunts, hence you have waterfowl hunters who don't pursue pheasants, and deer bowhunters who don't hunt deer with a gun.

But one concern across the country is that many youth aren't getting a chance to try it to see if they have an interest because of state regulations that are considered by some as barriers to attracting new hunters. Other



factors include an ongoing population shift from rural to urban areas, competing recreational activities, electronic entertainment and single-parent households.

The Youth Hunting Report

While youth hunting has been a relevant topic for years, the national attention level has increased significantly the last two years following release of a study called the Youth

Hunting Report. Research for the report was conducted by consulting firms Southwick and Associates and Silvertip Productions, as well as the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance. The National Shooting Sports Foundation and National Wild Turkey Federation sponsored the research.

The report was basically a call for action to make it easier for youth to get a start in hunting as early as possible. So far, in several

states that did not allow any hunting by kids before age 12, legislation has passed to reduce the minimum age for some or all types of hunting, as long as the young hunter is accompanied by a parent or other adult.

Those types of changes mirror what is already occurring in North Dakota, where youngsters can start hunting everything, except big game with a firearm, at their parents' discretion, at any age up through 11. At age 12, youngsters must have completed the state's hunter education course to receive a license.

Young hunters of any age, however, have to buy a general game and habitat stamp, so there is a way to determine the ages at which kids get started hunting. Game and Fish records of electronic license sales, and Harvest Information Program registrations required of all migratory bird hunters, regardless of age, indicate only a handful of kids get a hunting license before age 8. A few start hunting at 8. A few more start at 9 and then the number increases every year up through age 15.

By the time North Dakota kids reach age 14 when they can hunt big game with a firearm, most have already hunted something else, such as upland game or waterfowl. "In North Dakota, the first thing that kids hunt for, for the most part, is not deer," Rostvet stated.

The Youth Hunting Report based many of its recommendations on data from the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation conducted in 2001. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does the survey every five years to track a variety of hunting and fishing related information.

One of the data sets highlighted hunting participation in the United States. The survey indicated that nationally, 4.23 percent of youth ages 6-15 hunted in 2001. The participation rate for ages 16 and above was 6.15 percent. Comparing the number of youth hunters to the number of adult hunters provided what the report called a "hunter replacement ratio," or a value that relates to the number of young hunters coming up versus the number of adult hunters they will be replacing.

The national average was .69, or 4.23 divided by 6.15. Study authors indicated that a replacement rate of roughly 1.0 was needed just to maintain hunter numbers.

The replacement rate North Dakota received was .53, which, when taken at face value, creates the impression that the state is not doing well when it comes to attracting

Deer License First Lottery by Age Group

(without gratis)

Tracking deer license applications by age provides some insight into participation patterns. In each of the years highlighted, the number of people applying in the first lottery decreases markedly after age 17, then eventually goes back up. The key statistic for North Dakota is that over the 15 years from 1990-2005, the number of individuals in each of the younger age groupings went up considerably. For reference purposes, the special youth deer season began in 1994.

Age	1990	2000	2005
14	1,898	2,573	2,753
15	1,472	2,146	2,144
16	1,468	2,039	1,992
17	1,311	2,114	2,060
18	1,126	1,686	1,644
19	1,108	1,623	1,710
20	1,067	1,545	1,741
25	1,319	1,378	1,674
30	2,111	1,428	1,505
35	2,088	1,665	1,584
40	1,635	2,149	1,767
45	1,104	1,943	2,112
50	694	1,492	1,956
55	533	966	1,427
60	455	592	947
65	302	410	546
70	177	287	331

Numbers within age classes of Minnesota deer hunters in 2005.

The accompanying list of Minnesota deer hunter numbers indicates a similar trend – a distinct falloff after age 17.

Age	Hunters
12	6,858
13	9,072
14	9,868
15	10,401
16	9,743
17	9,193
18	7,970
19	7,343
20	7,229
21	7,074
22	6,983
30	6,422
32	6,082 (lowest)
45	9,907 (highest)

new hunters. However, there are other factors to consider.

In North Dakota, kids ages 6, 7, 8 and 9 account for an insignificant number of hunting licenses in the 6-15 age group. Peak participation within that age group is from 14-year-olds.

In 2000, the year from which report statistics were generated, 2,573 North Dakota 14-year-olds received a deer license. From a population of about 10,000 14-year-olds in the state at that time, that's a participation rate of nearly 26 percent.

In 2005, the number of 14-year-olds who received deer licenses was even higher, at 2,753, even though the population in that age group dropped to below 9,000. The number of 14-year-olds in the mix of deer hunters was higher than any other single age group, both by raw count, and by percentage.

The rate of deer hunting participation for 14-17-olds in 2005 was 25.9 percent. The rate for ages 18-54 was 21.6 percent. Comparing the two yields a replacement rate of 1.19.

The difference between this and the figure used in the Youth Hunting Report, is that the groupings are ages where hunters are most likely to have started, and have not reached the age where they start dropping out in significant numbers.

If only a few North Dakotans hunted deer, these figures wouldn't mean much. But of all people who hunted in North Dakota in 2005, more than 80 percent bought at least one license to hunt during the youth or regular deer gun season.

Clearly, at the moment, North Dakota's recruitment has not only kept pace, but has increased significantly over the past decade.

The Next 20 Years

The bottom line for North Dakota is this. At present, more North Dakota 14- and 15-year-olds are trying hunting than has ever been the case. Given similar resources, there's no reason to believe the percentage of North Dakota youth who start hunting will decline dramatically in the immediate near future.

The raw numbers, however, are more of a concern. Even at 20 percent participation, which is well above the national recruitment rate, North Dakota will lose a couple hundred young hunters per year, starting in about five years. Twenty years from now, that *will* make a difference.

In 2005 the number of ninth-graders was about 8,900. This is the biggest class in North Dakota's school system right now. The number of fifth-graders in 2005 was about 7,800.

In 3-4 years the state will have 1,100 fewer potential deer hunters to draw from. And yet, if North Dakota can maintain the percentages, it will still have enough hunters.

The challenge, it seems, is not so much introducing people to hunting, as it is keeping them interested once they start. Or put another way, how do we keep people from dropping out?

That's a topic that will likely generate considerable discussion over the next several years. But one thing is certain. If the state doesn't have good quality habitat in sufficient acreage to produce wildlife, there will be little to hunt and likely fewer hunters.

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Deer Hunting Minimum Age

In the Youth Hunting Report, North Dakota was labeled as a "restrictive" state as far as hunting regulations because its minimum age for hunting deer with firearms is 14, compared to most other states in the country where the minimum age is 12 or lower. The premise of the "restrictive" designation is that North Dakota's high minimum age is a barrier to increased youth participation.

Here's some statistics from our neighbors to the east and south, which allow firearms deer hunting at age 12.

2005 Deer Season

Age	# Hunters MN	% Of Population	# Hunters SD	%SD
12	6,858	9.7	1,767	15.7
13	9,072	12.6	1,525	13.5
14	9,868	13.3	1,403	12.47
15	10,401	13.5	1,430	12.7

Hunter Education Certification Rates

In North Dakota, youngsters must pass the state's hunter education course if they want to buy a hunting license when they reach age 12. Over the past several years, the number of kids passing the hunter education course has remained relatively consistent. While kids within each group take the course at different ages, by the time each group reaches 9th grade, about 40 percent of each class is hunter education certified.

Because of declining enrollments, however, even a 40 percent participation rate will yield several hundred fewer graduates in just a couple of years.

Year	AGE				Total 11-14	% 9th grade
	11	12	13	14		
1999	1,457					
2000	1,497	1,209	748	345		
2001	1,447	1,169	723	334		
2002	1,467	1,185	733	338	3,727	38.8
2003	1,408	1,137	704	325	3,724	39.2
2004	1,433	1,157	716	330	3,666	40.5
2005	1,276	1,031	638	294	3,604	40.0
2006		1,029				
2007			628			
2008				289	3,222	40.4

These figures are estimates based on total participants and historic participation rates of each age grouping.